**Disparities in Patient Portal Communication, Access, and Use**

Patient portals are secure websites that provide patients with access to their medical records and offer various health management features, such as appointment scheduling and secure messaging with providers. Portal use has been associated with improvements in health-related outcomes, including medication adherence, understanding of medical conditions, disease self-management, and shared decision-making.

Even though most health care organizations now offer patient portals, the number of patients reporting portal use remains relatively low. In 2020, approximately 40% of Americans reported accessing their online medical records/patient portals at least once in the past 12 months. Additionally, significant disparities exist in patient portal use, with underserved groups (including racial and ethnic minorities, those with lower socioeconomic status, older individuals, and persons with disabilities) using these tools less often. Limited portal use in these populations may be driven by various factors, such as personal preference or lack of access to technology. Some studies also suggest that certain groups (e.g., Black and Hispanic individuals) are less likely to report being offered access to a portal in the first place, suggesting that clinic practices and provider communication may also be contributing to disparities in patient portal use.

A previous HINTS Brief (Brief 45, 2021) highlighted trends and disparities in patient portal access from 2014 to 2018, demonstrating that, overall, patient portal access increased modestly (from 25.6% in 2014 to 31.4% in 2018), but that notable disparities persisted, with men and individuals of lower socioeconomic status being less likely to access patient portals. A more recent analysis using HINTS data from 2019 and 2020 found that 45% of Americans who had a health visit in the past 12 months reported accessing a patient portal. As patient portal use continues to increase, ongoing monitoring of disparities and a better understanding of the factors driving differences in access will be vital to ensure that all patients have the opportunity to take advantage of digital tools that can help them better manage their health.

**Quick Facts**

- Patient portal use is associated with improvements in various health-related outcomes, including disease self-management.
- Research suggests that patient portal use varies by sociodemographic characteristics, including race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and age.
- In 2020, 56% of American adults reported having ever been offered online access to a patient portal by their health care provider, 49% reported being encouraged to use the patient portal by their provider, and approximately 40% reported accessing the patient portal at least once in the past 12 months.

**Percentage of American adults who have ever been offered online access to their medical records by a health care provider**

- Yes: 15.3%
- No: 27.2%
- Don’t know: 56%
- Missing data: -1.5%

**Percentage of American adults who report ever being encouraged to use an online medical record by their health care provider**

- Yes: 49.3%
- No: 48.8%
- Don’t know: -1.9%

**Frequency of online medical record access over the past 12 months among American adults**

- 0 times: 58.7%
- 1 to 2 times: 16.6%
- 3 to 5 times: 12.1%
- 6 to 9 times: 5.3%
- 10 or more times: 5.5%
- Missing data: 1.8%

Source: HINTS 5 Cycle 4, 2020
How Can This Inform Your Work?

HINTS data indicate that if clinics and providers consistently offer patient portal access to all patients (for example, through the implementation of “universal access” policies at health organizations), some of the disparities currently observed in patient portal utilization could be decreased. Furthermore, the data suggest that provider encouragement can be an effective way to increase patient portal access and use once access has been offered. Patient–provider conversations that emphasize the potential benefits of patient portals for managing health and address specific barriers to use, such as concerns regarding privacy and security or potential impact on the patient–provider relationship, could help promote greater use of this technology.

Additionally, health care organizations could implement various interventions to support greater patient portal uptake. This may include offering training and assistance with the use of the technology for those with lower digital literacy, improving the usability of the portals to reduce cognitive load and better meet patient needs, and further encouraging portal use by including information about portals in all patient-facing communications, from appointment reminders to discharge summaries.

For More Information on Cancer

- Call the NCI Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER
- Visit [https://www.cancer.gov](https://www.cancer.gov)
- Order NCI publications at [https://pubs.cancer.gov/ncipl/home.aspx](https://pubs.cancer.gov/ncipl/home.aspx)
- Visit Facebook.com/cancer.gov and [https://www.youtube.com/ncigov](https://www.youtube.com/ncigov)

References Used in This Brief


